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Manchester College, Oxford.

THE OFFERING OF PRAYER.

Visitor's Address

BY THE

REV. V. D. DAVIS, B.A.,

At the close of the Session,

June, 1924.

MANCHESTER:
H. RAWSON AND CO., PRINTERS, NEW BROWN STREET.

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"Prayer is the hand that catcheth hold on peace."

H. S. Sutton.

"Children of men! not that your age excel
In pride of life the ages of your sires,
But that *ye* think clear, feel deep, bear fruit well
The Friend of man desires."

Matthew Arnold.

"All Friends that speak in public, see that it be in the life of God; for that begets to God; the fruit of that shall never wither."

George Fox.

"When ye pray, say, Father, hallowed be thy name."

The Offering of Prayer.

In the Ministry of Religion the supreme act is the offering of Prayer; and the aim of this Address to you, my Brothers and Sisters, who are here as students preparing to devote yourselves to that ministry, is to put before you, if I may, some considerations that may help towards clear perception and more complete consecration to that great end. It is a need of which, in this service, we have constantly to remind ourselves, as we ask: "Is there living reality in our prayer?"

Salutary warning and reproof many of us must have felt in those two letters which John Hamilton Thom wrote to Dr. Martineau, in August and December, 1891, on the publication of our great teacher's volume of "Home Prayers." The letters are preserved among the MS. treasures of the College library.* On hearing of the intended publication, Mr. Thom wrote to his friend, expressing his joy at the prospect: "It is what I have long earnestly desired; and I believe that nothing you have done will be of more value to our Churches in its influence on their offices of devotion, which to me are now the weakest and least satisfying part of their public ministrations. The prayers one generally hears are a string of petitions for blessings on ourselves, without anything to give the felt Presence from which the fresh spiritual life would flow. It is in the sense of a real communion, that God is speaking to us from His level, and not only we to Him from ours, that I have always felt the signal, and the almost singular power of your devotional offices to be." And after he had received the book, and tested its worth in daily use, he wrote again: "It is, I think, a fitting crown of all your previous work, not only for its peculiar value for its special

* They were printed in the *Inquirer* of January 21st, 1922.

purpose, and the help towards a felt personal communion which I know not where else can equally be found, but also for teaching those who read your more philosophical and elaborate works to know the dominating spirit of your life and faith. . . . I have long felt that a large part of the solution of that question so often asked of late, 'Why do not *we* make more progress in an age when orthodoxy seems extensively losing its hold, more or less, on all classes?' was to be found in this, that in most of our chapels the Devotional Services do not meet or satisfy, and ought not to satisfy, the wants and aspirations of public Common Worship. . . . What is wanting in our ordinary public worship is the power of imparting the sense of God speaking to us in our act of speaking to Him, in the solemn awe of His presence and felt communion with our wants and aspirations, and that is the feeling your public Prayers had always given me."

The voice of John Hamilton Thom was last heard in this College at the Centenary meeting of Trustees in London, in 1886; and among our most cherished possessions are the Addresses he gave as Visitor in earlier years, and the volumes of his sermons, "Laws of Life after the Mind of Christ." At the time of his death, thirty years ago, Dr. Jacks wrote of him (in the Liverpool *Daily Post*) that his published writings "convey the simple utterance of a man of God." "The sermons of Mr. Thom form a lasting storehouse of the bread of life. They are the expression of a soul manifestly impelled to utterance by the power of the Spirit. In the happier future, when the differences between Christians are rated at their proper worth, readers of these sermons will forget to ask of what complexion was their author's creed. They will think of him only as one born in the highest rank of souls, quickened by the consciousness of God, trained by communion with the spirit of Christ, and sublimely confident of the inner truth of the message given him to deliver."

Here then is clearly one to whose word we shall be wise to attend. And on this special subject of Prayer there is an essay of his, first published in the *Theological Review* fifty

years ago, and since reprinted at the end of the third edition of his "Christ, the Revealer." The essay enforces more fully the thought of those two letters of his last years. Here are some vital sentences:

"The first condition of effectual prayer is that we do not speak into empty space, that the awe of the great Presence is upon us, that the mighty Shadow has circled us in, the Spirit brooding on our souls in a sense of One very nigh in whom love and holiness are perfect,—and that then we speak, if we speak at all, only as we are moved, only that which we should dare to speak if we stood before his face and saw the majesty of God. . . We are so liable to be unreal in our devotions, to have no overshadowing consciousness of the awful Being, awful in his goodness even more than in his power, awful in his nearness and in his mysterious connection with us, to whom we are about to speak, that we come not to know that it is an act of the highest irreverence to dare to speak to God without first carefully drawing nigh unto him, and seeking by collectedness of being to be penetrated through and through by the sense of what he is. . . . Prayer fails because to the soul there was no real presence of God while we were praying. And though no efforts of ours can find him out unto perfection, or 'set the Lord before us' as he is, we can yet use fitting ways of approaching towards him, so as to avail ourselves of his own willingness to manifest himself." (p. 192.)

And take this reference to the Book of Common Prayer, in which Mr. Thom recognised "the great merit of earnest simplicity, of freedom from rhetoric, of solemn unadorned address to God." Yet prevailingly, he adds, "it has one defect, that it makes our approaches legal, dutiful, external, as to our creator, ruler, lawgiver, and judge—comparatively seldom filial, personal, receptive, as to the Father of spirits in contact with our spirits, who pours life into us from himself, and is in conscious communion with his children. Public prayer, which rises into sympathy with all human interests yet speaks only to God, is a great spiritual act." (p. 210.)

That is what we need constantly to realise more completely, and for which we must humbly and earnestly seek the ways of preparation. If there is to be reality in our prayer, we must be quite clear that it is to be the utterance, whether in silence or in spoken words, of our whole life. That "great spiritual act" of which Mr. Thom spoke, the living prayer offered by the minister in the congregation, is simply the bringing to a focus, in that fellowship, of what must be the aspiration and the life of each one, through the whole range of human experience and duty. Truly conceived and realised, it is the culminating act of the minister of religion, whose whole being is pledged to that service of the true life with God; and in it all those who are gathered with him in that communion of worship equally have their part. Out of the life the prayer must come. It is to be an act of common worship, an expression of the common life of the people of God, in their conscious approach to him, and their reliance on the quickening of his Spirit. What measure of the reality and power of prayer may be granted to us is not for us to say, nor how far we may be able to enter into the fulness of life in the Spirit; but we know the end towards which we aspire, and look up to the light of the ideal. Achievement is of the grace of God, a gift which comes to us from him. "Prayer is the breath of life," wrote Isaac Penington, one of the noblest and most discerning of the seventeenth century Quakers. "Prayer is the breath of life, an effect of God's spiritual breathing, which no man can perform aright without the Spirit's breathing upon him. Therefore the Spirit is to be waited for, for His breathings and holy fire, that the sacrifice may be living, and acceptable to the living God." And Rufus Jones, of the same household and lineage, in our own time, is equally insistent that prayer is religion in act, "immediate spiritual fellowship," "a direct way of vital intercourse between man and God." Out of the gathered silence of the people waiting upon God this utterance of the life must come. "Not an empty utterance of words," so Auguste Sabatier puts it, "not the repetition of certain sacred

formulas, but the movement of the soul putting itself into personal relation and contact with the mysterious power whose presence it feels even before it is able to give it a name." And Baron von Hügel, in a happy phrase, reminds us that the soul "can and ought frequently to recollect itself in a simple sense of God's presence."

These sentences are quoted by Rufus Jones in his essay on "Prayer and the Mystic Way," in the volume "Concerning Prayer," edited by Canon Streeter, and Jones further amplifies the thought where he says: "There must be in the spiritual adventure of the soul the decision to *plunge*, or, to change the imperfect figure, the resolution, as Boehme puts it, to lift the whole heart and mind and will and raise it to God. If one is to have the experience of incoming divine tides, the consummate beatitude of communion, one must seek it with earnestness of purpose and open the gates of the soul for it. The central act of religion, on the human side, is this expectant, co-operative raising of the soul to a personal experimental consciousness of the real presence of God."‡ The Quaker testimony on this subject is of the greatest value to us all. Violet Hodgkin, who wrote the "Book of Quaker Saints," gave a beautiful title to her Swarthmore Lecture, when she called it "Silent Worship: the Way of Wonder"; and I should like to refer you also to the more recent essay by Edmund Harvey, now in Parliament again, on "Silence and Worship, a Study of Quaker Experience."

The testimony of Robert Barclay, in the chapter on "Worship" in his Apology, is well known, but one does not tire of repeating it:

"When I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me, and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life, whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed. And indeed this is the surest way to become a

‡ "Concerning Prayer" (1916), p. 123.

Christian, to whom afterwards the knowledge and understanding of principles will not be wanting, but will grow up so much as is needful, as the natural fruit of this good root, and such knowledge will not be barren nor unfruitful. After this manner we desire therefore all who come among us to be proselyted, knowing that though thousands should be convinced in their understanding of all the truths we maintain, yet if they were not sensible of this inward life, and their souls not changed from unrighteousness to righteousness, they could add nothing to us."

And in an earlier passage of the same section we read: "As everyone is thus gathered, and so met together inwardly in their spirits, as well as outwardly in their persons, there the secret power and virtue of life is known to refresh the soul, and the pure motions and breathings of God's Spirit are felt to arise; from which, as words of declaration, prayers or praises arise, the acceptable worship is known, which edifies the church and is well pleasing to God. . . . Yea, though there be not a word spoken, yet is the true spiritual worship performed, and the body of Christ edified; yea, it may, and hath often fallen out among us, that divers meetings have passed without one word; and yet our souls have been greatly edified and refreshed, and our hearts wonderfully overcome with the secret sense of God's power and Spirit, which without words have been ministered from one vessel to another."

As with Robert Barclay, so had it been earlier with Isaac Penington. There is a close parallel between the two testimonies, but Penington's experience came ten years before Barclay's. I quote from his narrative written in Aylesbury Prison in 1667. Rumour of what the Quakers were had reached him, and he had been invited to hear one of them. "When I came," he says, "I felt the presence and power of the Most High among them, and words of truth from the Spirit of truth reaching to my heart and conscience, opening my state as in the presence of the Lord. Yea, I did not only feel words and demonstrations from without, but I felt the dead quickened, the seed raised [that is, the impulse, the

quickening of the purer spirit of life in his own being]; insomuch as my heart, in the certainty of light and clearness of true sense, said:—"This is He; this is He; there is no other; this is He whom I have waited for and sought after from my childhood, who was always near me, and had often begotten life in my heart, but I knew Him not distinctly, nor how to receive Him or dwell with Him. . . . I have met with my God, I have met with my Saviour, and He hath not been present with me without His salvation, but I have felt the healings drop upon my soul from under His wings. I have met with the true knowledge, the knowledge of life, the knowledge which is life."*

There is no mistaking the genuine ring in those words, and surely they show to us the true way of approach, if living prayer is to be quickened in our hearts. In silence and great humility, and reverent waiting upon God, we must draw near to the Presence of the Holiest, that we may feel the overshadowing of the Spirit, the inward quickening of the deeper life in our own being, in a sense, as Mr. Thom said, "of One very nigh in whom love and holiness are perfect"; and then we must speak, if we speak at all, only such words as are fitting in that Presence,—words, if it may be granted us, to which the Spirit gives utterance. What we desire is that God shall speak to us, and through us as his ministers, of his presence, as we speak with him.

"God is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him." That is the way of approach for our living Prayer, the prayer which in its essence, under whatever form, is the right attitude, the right direction of our whole life. Prayer, in Penington's phrase, is breath of life for us, "an effect of God's spiritual breathing," which can be given to us in living power only as we become truly aware of his presence.

We may receive the gift through the ministry of Nature. Of this Wordsworth is our chief witness; but let me cite a

*Quoted in Part I. of the Quaker Book of Discipline (1922), "Christian Life, Faith and Thought in the Society of Friends," p. 37.

less familiar instance, in the experience recorded by Hugh Macnaghten, an Eton house-master, in his beautiful sonnet, "Sunrise on the Aletsch Glacier."* In the outpouring of the Divine joy in creation, we know how constantly "God makes Himself a glorious rose of dawn." It is so, whether any human heart is there to see and rejoice in it or not; but one day this man was there to see, and he tells us what it meant to him:—

"Unwitnessed, at the birth of every sun,
Here, in the mountain solitude sublime,
Eternal power reveals itself through time,
And morn by morn the mighty works are done.
And here to-morrow on the lonely way
There may be signs and wonders, and the same
Transfiguration turn no heart to flame;—
Ah! well for me that I was here to-day.
I stood above the range of earthly care
And rested in the Sanctuary lone,
Breathing the grace of sacramental air
From snowy courts around the great white throne,
And in the silent sunrise unaware
I passed into the Presence, and have known."

God touched his heart, and in that silent Presence of unutterable glory he knew the pure Spirit of life, and who it was who so held him, folded in the great Peace. And it is not only among the mountains of God that we are so brought into the Sanctuary. Even in the lowliest place it may be the same, in the green pastures and where he leads beside still waters. In any place in the lovely garden of God, in some quiet corner of your own garden, look into the heart of a little flower in its simplicity, perfect in beauty and in purity, and the peace of God is there, the great tenderness of the Love Divine. There also you are on the threshold, by that way of wonder you may enter in, and speak with God in prayer. In the first

* "Ave Regina and other Poems," by Hugh Macnaghten, 1904. Also in "The Voice of the Mountains," ed. by Ernest A. Baker and F. E. Ross, 1905, 1913.

freshness of the morning, in the quietness, breathing his pure air, looking up into the clear heavens, you may realise it. So he holds us in life and tells us to be glad. And for us, as for the Psalmist of old, there is the perfectly natural response, whether we put it into words of prayer or not: "Father, we walk with thee in thankfulness in the lovely places thou hast given us, in the great concord of life."

> "Flowers laugh before thee on their beds
> And fragrance in thy footing treads;
> Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong;
> And the most ancient heavens through thee are
> fresh and strong."

Of Duty Wordsworth said it; but who shall separate the Voice of the living God from him, the Eternal Goodness, ever present with his unfailing care, who so speaks and quickens life in us?

So we pass from the ministry of Nature, in that glorious temple of his praise, to the inner sanctuary of the human heart. And there also it is the same. The way of approach is in silence, reverent, silent waiting upon God, that the spirit of worship may be kindled and living prayer achieved. You enter a great cathedral or a quiet meeting-house, in which the outward form and the very atmosphere is instinct with prayer. It is a word of lowly reverence that is so expressed, of trust and aspiration, and in the great spaces of the cathedral an overshadowing of awe and a hushed expectancy. They who enter, if they are wise and know their own need, submit themselves to that appeal. They quiet restless thought and lay down the burden of anxious care, they strip themselves of every vestige of pride and surrender every impulse of self-seeking. They have come into the Holy Place, to be submitted to its influence, a gathered people, that they may be attentive to the Truth teaching inwardly, and that for each one there may be an open and interior way of approach to the felt Presence of the Holiest. There in the silence it is found that God will speak with his people and make himself known as

the Helper of their every need, the Father with his children. It is a common mind that brings them there into the Presence of the Eternal, and the bread of life is broken for them all in brotherly communion. It is a great mystery, but it is living truth, and in that conviction we remain humble seekers of the light.

And if one is set in the midst as appointed teacher and leader, in the human way, of the devotions of the gathered people, it is a great and sacred obligation that is laid upon him. It is for him to gather up the sense of that wonderful communion, and to speak, if he may, the fitting word of prayer. If it is to be true prayer, and not a vain repetition, it must always be as the Spirit gives utterance. The word of the teacher is for the right direction of thought, to help towards clear understanding of life, seen in the light of the Divine purpose, to kindle the response of true emotion and faithful endeavour, to deepen consecration and determined effort in the service of the Kingdom of God, both for himself and those who are with him in the sanctuary; and that quickening of life, which is the right aim of preaching, issues in prayer. The life *is* the prayer, to which any words that can be used simply give utterance, as a token before God, in the communion of the congregation, that living truth is in them. Thus our preaching must be tested. Does it issue in prayer? And for our words of prayer, are they our very life, or merely a laboured or a vain repetition?

Men speak of a minister in church reading the service, or perhaps using a written prayer of his own; but *does he pray?* That is the vital question. Does the spirit of prayer breathe in his life and in the lives of those gathered with him in the congregation? There are differences of administration, we remember, but one Spirit; and for all of us the question is, are we in that Spirit? The service in a church of elaborate ritual, with a noble liturgy, may be alive with the spirit of a true devotion and hearts may be lifted up in humble and adoring prayer, while a Quaker meeting, be the people few or many, may be quite dead. On the other hand, the exact

opposite may be true. The ritual may be a mechanical make-believe, and the liturgy be read in a voice of self-satisfied formalism, while in the silent meeting of Friends that living power may be felt, of which Penington and Barclay spoke, and out of it the voice of prayer may rise, and in that communion of the Spirit the Father's quickening of the life and benediction of his children may be wonderfully realised. Other methods of administration include elements from both of those extremes, but always, if there is life, as there may be, it is in the one, self-same Spirit. And in considering our duty in the matter of prayer in the congregation, this must be the paramount thought: By what way shall we be most surely led, that we may be "in the Spirit on the Lord's day," and in the Holy Presence bring the offering of living prayer? A liturgy may gather up much of the best that has been uttered in prayer through the devotion of the ages, and like a great cathedral it invites to prayer. Only it must be such that through its forms of prayer we can truly pray. There has been much talk recently of the needed revision of the Prayer Book of the Church of England. Among the essays in that volume "Concerning Prayer," from which I have already quoted, there is one by the Rev. Harold Anson, on "Prayer as Understanding," which touches upon this. He notes that there are still pagan ideas, from which the devotional literature of the Church needs to be cleansed, that public worship may be more truly ordered "in filial approach to God and the certainty of His will to hear us, and the sure knowledge that He is Love." "Prayer in the future," Mr. Anson writes, "will surely lose wholly its element of deprecation; it will, perhaps, lose in part its form of petition; it will tend to increase its element of affirmation. Acts of faith and hope, of love and penitence, will find a larger place. Greater stress will be laid upon the element of adoration, the quiet contemplation of God's nature and purpose, the corporate silence in which God says much, while we listen much and speak not at all, the cleansing of the avenues of the mind through which understanding comes to us as we live in

conscious fellowship with Divine purposes."* There is much, undoubtedly, in the Prayer Book that needs revision, far more than is likely to be effected until the Church is brought back much more nearly to the simplicity of Christ, and his spirit in prayer; but even with the best of liturgies limitations would remain.

It is good to rest a troubled spirit in the strength of consecrated words, that have been living prayer in devout souls through many generations. There is strength and solace in them and guidance into the true way of prayer. Yet often in the use of a liturgy there are things that have lost their hold, and it is more in the silences than in the stated words that prayer is found to be kindled. And to me, I confess, it seems that the utterance of the free spirit in immediate communion with the Eternal, in the fellowship of the congregation, is a greater and more kindling thing, when it is actually achieved, than the most devout outpouring through the forms of a liturgy. May it not be that the ideal service of united worship would allow for the use of both methods? The liturgical portion, at the opening of the service, through the utterance of the most universal aspirations of religion, would then prepare the way, gathering the people into a true communion, out of which might come the prayer of the free spirit. The restfulness and guidance of the first office would open a way for the kindling of the living word. To contemplate this ideal lays an added burden on the minister. It is the harder course, making greater demand on spiritual resources than the simple dependence on a complete form of liturgy. It is a greater responsibility, but at the same time a higher privilege, and there is in it the promise of richer blessing. It is the thought of this high privilege that I desired specially to put before you, with the need for more complete, more earnest consecration to that end, seeing that no greater demand can be made upon you than this, for

* "Concerning Prayer," p. 102.

the offering of prayer. It is a consideration not to be neglected in this time of your preparation for the Ministry of Religion.

"Lord, what a change within us one short hour
Spent in thy presence will prevail to make,
What heavy burdens from our bosoms take,
What parchèd grounds refresh, as with a shower!
We kneel, and all around us seems to lower;
We rise, and all, the distant and the near,
Stands forth in sunny outline, brave and clear;
We kneel how weak, we rise how full of power.
Why therefore should we do ourselves this wrong,
Or others—that we are not always strong,
That we are ever overbornè with care,
That we should ever weak or heartless be,
Anxious or troubled, when with us is prayer,
And joy and strength and courage are with Thee."

R. C. Trench.